

Rochester Institute of Technology

**RIT Scholar Works**

---

Theses

---

8-1-1985

## Neighborhood aesthetics

Cleveland Mills

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

---

### Recommended Citation

Mills, Cleveland, "Neighborhood aesthetics" (1985). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact [ritscholarworks@rit.edu](mailto:ritscholarworks@rit.edu).

Neighborhood Aesthetics

by

Cleveland D. Mills  
(Buck)

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM

SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

AUGUST, 1985

Charles Werberig, Chairperson  
Associate Professor  
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

**Charles Werberig**

Elliott Rubenstein  
Associate Professor  
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

**Elliott Rubenstein**

Harvey Green  
Deputy Director for Interpretation  
Historian  
The Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum

**Harvey Green**

PERMISSION STATEMENT

Title of Thesis: Neighborhood Aesthetics

I, Cleveland D. (Buck) Mills,  
hereby grant permission to the Wallace Memorial Library,  
of R.I.T., to reproduce my thesis in whole or in part.  
Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or for  
profit.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page	
1	Index to Images
2	Introduction
4	Discussion
12	Technical Information
15	Conclusion
16	Bibliography

## Index to Images

1. Beginnings of a New Project, LacDeVille Development, Brighton, 1984
2. Window Display with Customer Service Area, Sherman Williams Paint and Wallpaper Shop, 1984
3. Living Room with Fake T.V., Ruby Gordon's, 1985
4. Studded Walls and Completed House in Background, Eagle Ridge, Ryan Homes, Henrietta, 1984
5. Incomplete Basement, Eagle Ridge, Ryan Homes, Henrietta, 1984
6. Dining Room with Bright Light, Ruby Gordon's, 1984
7. Bedroom Set #2, Ruby Gordon's, 1984
8. Wallpaper Display Corridor, Sherman Williams Paint and Wallpaper Shop, 1984
9. Bedroom with Split Picture, Ruby Gordon's, 1984
10. Bedroom with Floating Carpets, Ruby Gordon's, 1984
11. Bedroom, Model Home, Brighton, 1984
12. Bathroom Sink and Mannequins, Rocco J. Viele Co., Bathroom Showroom, Lyell Ave., 1984
13. Living Room #1, Mangurians, 1984
14. Christmas Time, Mangurians, 1984
15. Row of Beds, Mangurians, 1984
16. Living Room, Model Home, Brighton, 1984
17. Living Room with Fabgard Sign, Ruby Gordon's, 1985
18. Living Room with Cat, Mangurians, 1984
19. Mannequin Beside Bathtub, Rocco J. Viele Co., Bathroom Showroom, Lyell Ave., 1984
20. Bedroom with Wheatfield Wallpaper, Ruby Gordon's, 1984

21. Dirt Pile with Small Pool, Eagle Ridge, Ryan Homes, Henrietta, 1984
22. Scene from Overpass on South Clinton Avenue, Brighton Commons, 1984
23. House Under Construction with Parts In Front Yard, Eagle Ridge, Ryan Homes, Henrietta, 1984
24. House Near Completion with Rock, Eagle Ridge, Ryan Homes, Henrietta, 1984
25. House Near Completion (Frontview), Eagle Ridge, Ryan Homes, Henrietta, 1984
26. Bathroom, Model Home, Brighton, 1984
27. Garage, Eagle Ridge, Ryan Homes, Henrietta, 1984
28. Canopy Bed, Ruby Gordon's, 1984
29. House Foundation, Eagle Ridge, Ryan Homes, Henrietta, 1984
30. Fake? House Front, Brighton Commons, 1984
31. Backyards, Brighton Commons, 1984
32. Dining Room, Mangurians, 1984
- 33 - 39 The Installation at the Pyramid Arts Center

## NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS

### Introduction

The photographs in this exhibit were taken in a variety of places, all dealing with the home and its furnishings. The sources are construction sites, finished homes, model homes, furniture stores and specialty home stores such as a bathroom display showroom, kitchen display showroom and a paint and wallpaper shop. My intention was to express my view towards what a large portion of today's society accepts as home. It can be seen as a "document" but the sensitive viewer should be able to see the definite slant of sarcasm towards these environments as home. They are dwelling places but everything is new and exhibits a sterile quality that is not home-like. Everything is for sale or has recently been purchased. People with little imagination would reassembled their purchases in much the same fashion as the store displays. These re-constructed displays would be recognized as a home, but would still give the un-nerving feeling that something is missing. Certainly few people live in an environment quite like the one I have constructed: this is an exaggeration, but how great is that exaggeration?



## Discussion

The thesis work began as a series of exterior views of houses here in the Rochester area. My first impression of Rochester was that of a very conservative, middle class type of town. The work generated from the desire to know where I was now living and to explore my identity in terms of this society. Many times it was suggested that I go inside the homes because the exteriors gave an interpretation of the neighborhoods that wasn't real. This un-real interpretation of middle-class life was my full intention. I realized that to actually document middle-class, suburban life-styles would be less effective than to construct my own idea of that life-style. On a visit to a furniture store I found the interior view of suburbia which I wanted for my neighborhood. On this realization I visited many furniture stores here in Rochester but found Ruby Gordon's on West Henrietta Road, Mangurians on Monroe Avenue and Rocco Vieles Bathroom Showroom on Lyell Avenue to exhibit the characteristics I most desired. I visited and re-visited all of these places to observe changes in displays as well as changes in my own perspective of things which allowed for new discoveries each time I visited the showrooms.

Although I have stated that the work began as a series of exteriors of housing construction it really started much earlier. It began with a re-evaluation of my aesthetics and



an awareness of my place in society. Most of my earlier work was more concerned with shape, form, light and line; elements that are purely aesthetic concerns. There was little intellectual thought as to subject and statement. The photographs were purely visual. Over the years I have become more aware of the strong associative power that photography possesses, that there is more to photography than simplistic formal qualities. Though I still feel that the visual and aesthetic concerns are important the associative and intellectual concerns have become increasingly important. For me these aspects of photography hold more facination.

My early photography was very much influenced by extremely traditional photographers. When I first saw an Ansel Adams photograph I was overwhelmed by the beauty of tones and the structure of the photograph. I took into my admiration others with a similar traditional foundation. Minor White, Walker Evans, Paul Caponigro, and Edward Weston were photographers I admired and attempted to emulate. Later some of my aesthetic views became less rigidly defined and I began to enjoy other photographers who still worked in a traditional manner but whose aesthetic was somewhat more current and loosely defined. But all the while I was pre-occupied by the fine print. I became most interested in view camera work and the photographs still exhibit my concern for quality.

I began to feel quite displeased with my photography and the general lack of social comment in current photography. The photographic art that was most visible did not deal with our time but seemed compelled to express the old "timeless" quality established by photographers such as Ansel Adams and Minor White etc. Although there does not need to be a social statement in all art there should be some amount of thought other than the relationships of shape, form, line, light and composition. Too frequently "artists" present work whose bonding characteristic is the similarity of their imagery and similarity to an established aesthetic. Those artists do not go beyond the tradition to establish any kind of personal statement.

In addition to the awareness that I developed toward photography an equal awareness developed in my response to my social environment. I began to think more about how we lead our lives. Forming a social ideology starts from our early up-bringing. Mine happens to have been in an environment nothing like the one I have established in these photographs. However, I have been exposed to the type of environments depicted in the photographs. I have witnessed friends whose goals in life have become so possessed by the standardized middle class ideal of material comfort that they ultimately lost their individual identity. I have been involved in relationships which were destined to fail

because of my partner's desire for this type of life-style. My photographs speak of that population of "Yuppies", who seem to be driven not by a desire for individuality but to conformity. In the past few years I have become acutely more aware of all of these things. I desire that my photographs reveal more about our society and my relationship to that society.

Through a more solid realization of these issues the exterior views became less and less important. I felt that both aesthetically and expressively these photographs showed less growth. They were too similar to my past work, and at some point I felt that they were actually too easy to make. They were concerned with a much simpler, one dimensional view of the potential of photographic imagery. Perspective, general composition, light and organization of space seemed to be their primary preoccupation. That type of photographic objective can certainly be traced back through a long line of photographic history.

I find my photographs of the interiors to be more aesthetically original. They stimulate a more intellectual and sensual nerve than the exterior photographs. They are also more broadly expressive of me rather than only of my ability to manipulate the mechanics of formal arrangement. Yet, in spite of the traditional associations the exterior photographs may have I found them necessary in the evolution



of the overall nature of the thesis. The interiors have become the main emphasis of the exhibit.

The idea behind the exhibit is not one of social change. My photographs are not intended to change the world view of what constitutes taste, the poor quality of housing in today's society or the ills of a capitalistic society. My photographs reflect my position of this society. In addition they provide those individuals with a similar ideology an opportunity for identification, a friendly reassurance, and a reminder of what they do not want to become. I would not want these places to disappear. They are too important as both social signs and signifiers.

My thesis exhibit consisted of (32) 16 x 20 inch black and white photographs of these 21 were interiors and 11 were exterior scenes. I was rather surprised by the number of people who insisted on a comparison of my photographs to those of Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams. Granted the subject matter photographed in the exteriors is the same - suburban housing - but the interior photographs are totally unlike those of Baltz (Empty interiors, exploring the graphic qualities of light and composition to the exclusion of an imagery that represented life-styles of their occupants.) Baltz was very concerned with the possible beauty, in graphic terms, displayed by landscapes and interiors of

modern buildings. Robert Adams compares man made structures with the expressive power that nature possesses and the predominance of nature over man. I therefore find this connection unfounded. I have been influenced by these photographers. However the overall statement of my exhibit - which combines exterior and interior views with the objective of creating a more complex imagery and a broader narrative - and the statement that I believe Adams and Baltz were making is totally different.

More influential to my photography are the photographs by Joe Steinmetz in Killing Time. These photographs speak of a life-style. Steinmetz may be somewhat misrepresented in this book. He did not intend to make a joke of these people and their life-styles. That appears to have been the work of the editor, Barbara Northfleet. But the photographs, independent of Northfleet's editorializing, did provide an inspiration for me. Looking through old copies of interior design magazines provided a similar stimulus. These latter photographs, produced for serious marketing intentions, become rather humorous as changing times reveal their pretensions.

The compilation of my thesis exhibit became as important as the individual photographs. To achieve the intended statement I attempted many different sequences of photographs. For example, I tried to basically construct a

house from the empty landscape to the complete exterior and furnished interior. This seemed too simplistic and rather boring. I tried other combinations such as concentrating groups of similar compositional structure or places, front views of houses, bedroom scenes, etc. Ultimately the opening photographs were an introduction to the body of the overall exhibit (slides 1 - 4); there was the empty landscape, the interior of a paint and wallpaper shop, an exterior of a house under construction, and an interior view of a furniture store which could be seen as the interior of a home.

Throughout the exhibit connections were made in both broad visual terms and specific subject matter. This is a special emphasis in the introductory photographs. Breaks in the flow of viewing were provided so the audience would not be too overburdened by the complexity of the imagery. There were aggressive pictures that forced themselves on the viewer and passive photographs that required that the viewer to move into the photograph and work a little to experience the breath and subtlety of the information. To provide additional relief, there were photographs that could be enjoyed for their formal and tonal beauty while still including allusions consistent with the intent of the rest of the exhibit.

The exterior photographs became more of a foundation upon which the interiors of furniture stores and other shops formed a specific narrative. Without the inclusion of the exterior views the audience would not have had the impression of a neighborhood.

In my earlier photography I was interested in the singular image. One photograph could be complete on its own. An exhibit would be a series of possibly visually related pictures but the dependency of one photograph on the rest of the group was minimal. Now I feel that the individual image is somewhat less important. I no longer believe in the "master" photograph. I see stronger value, not in the singular, individual image, but in the statement of the overall body of work. The question of selecting the individual image for an "art" exhibit is troubling. To remove the photographs from the context of the overall body changes the message. Recently I re-hung the Neighborhood Aesthetics exhibit at the University of Rochester. Because the space was smaller I had to eliminate several photographs and change their spacing and overall layout. This produced a totally different show, one that I feel was weaker than the Pyramid Gallery exhibit. This experience highlighted the importance of the overall statement over the individual photograph.



## Technical Information

The photographs were made entirely with a 5 x 7 inch Deardorff view camera. I felt that quality was essential to the feel of the photographs. Lack of grain, sharpness, tonal reproduction, and the perspective controls of the view camera were integral to the aesthetic. The ability to control perspective was of vital importance.

The necessity of the very wide angle lens needed to photograph in the confined spaces of the interiors demanded the use of the view camera's controls. Most images display the "proper" perspective dictated by tradition. However, some of the images exaggerate or reverse the traditionally expected perspective. "Fake? House Front" (slide # 30) for example reverses the normal conversion of lines and instead creates the illusion that the house expands and looms over the viewer. In "Wallpaper Display Corridor" (slide #8) the ceiling seems to slope down to the right side. These effects were achieved by what many would call an improper use of the view camera's controls. The fine tonal quality and sharpness possible due in part to the lack of grain and partially to the little magnification needed for the 5 X 7 inch negative were essential to emphasize the sometimes bizarre lighting and the subtle variation of shades.

In the beginning photographs of interiors I depended totally on the existing light conditions. Frequently this presented considerable exposure problems. The zone system helped a great deal but could not correct extremes. I was reluctant to add my own lighting, primarily because I did not want to make photographs that would look too much like commercial photography. I wanted the established lighting style of the interiors to remain intact.

At times even the photographs made under extreme conditions proved to be very successful. "Dining Room with Bright Light" (slide # 6) and "Bedroom with Wheatfield Wallpaper" (slide # 20) exhibit lighting techniques that many would find abrasive to their traditional photographic tastes. But the quality of the lighting creates an atmosphere that is fitting to my thesis and separates them from the conventions of commercial photography. Later, when I found it necessary to provide additional light I believe I was successful at integrating my lighting technique with the overall style found in the exhibit.

The final prints were made on Agfa Portriga Rapid paper. They were processed in a variety of developers: Dektol, Selectol, Selectol-Soft, and Beers formula. The Beers formula was the final choice because of the great variations possible in controlling contrast through the different combinations of part A and part B. It also provided a color

that was more pleasing than the greenish tone I usually got with the Kodak developers. All prints are 16 x 20 inches and for the show were not framed or matted but simply presented behind glass. The choice of presenting the photographs un-matted and un-framed came in direct relationship to my desire to form a specific narrative and to negate the singular image concept.

I tried several times to work in color thinking that color, especially in the interiors, might be an additional technical and expressive innovation. But in those photographs the inventory of items and the relationships between them became secondary because of the predominance of the color. For this reason I decided that the qualities of the black and white print would be much more effective in presenting the objectives of my thesis project.

## Conclusion

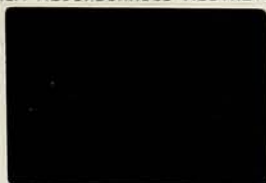
The thesis proved to be the most challenging photographic project I've ever undertaken. After exploring several different expressive directions I was fortunate to discover a project that had a specific, inspiring objective. The combination of changes in my perspective on life and photography and my ability to express them through the thesis represents growth both photographically and personally. I only hope that I will soon experience the same enthusiasm for a new project which is expressive of still further growth.

## Bibliography

- Adams, Robert, The New West": Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range, The Colorado Associated Press, 1974
- \_\_\_\_\_, Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area, The Colorado Associated Press, 1977
- \_\_\_\_\_, From The Missouri West", Aperture, 1980
- Bachelard, Gaston, The Poetics of Space, Beacon Press, Boston, 1964
- Baltz, Lewis, "Review of The New West", Art In America, (March-April, 1975)
- Baltz, Lewis, Park City, Essay by Gus Blaisdell, Castelli Graphics, New York, 1980
- Hare, Chauncey, Interior America, Aperture, 1978
- Kling, Christian G., Trends In American Suburbia, John Fisher College, 1971
- Owens, Bill, Suburbia, Straight Arrow Books, San Francisco, 1973
- Northfleet, Barbara, Killing Time: Photographs by Joe Steinmetz, David R. Godine, Publisher, Boston, 1982
- Peluzzi, Giulio, The Modern Room, Universe Books, 1967, N.Y.
- Schuler, J.E., ed., Text by Bauer, Franz, Interiors: For Contemporary Living, Architectural Book Publishing Co. Inc., New York, 1960



CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



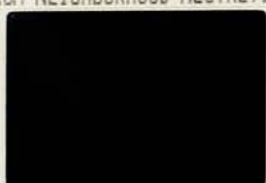
SLIDE #1

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



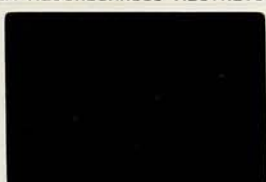
SLIDE #2

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #3

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #4

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #5

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #6

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #7

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #8

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #9

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #10

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #11

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #12

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #13

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #14

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #15

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #16

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #17

2 CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #18

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #19

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #20

3 CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #21

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



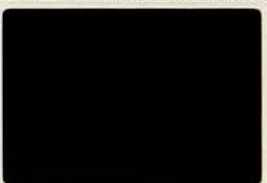
SLIDE #22

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



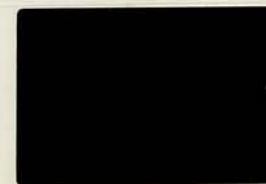
SLIDE #23

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #24

C.D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #25

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #26  
K58 V

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #27  
K58 V

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #28

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #29

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #30



CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #31

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #32

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #33

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #34

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



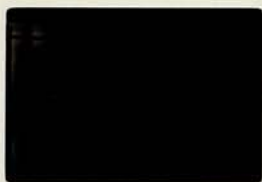
SLIDE #35

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #36

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #37

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #38

CLEVELAND D. (BUCK) MILLS  
FROM NEIGHBORHOOD AESTHETICS



SLIDE #39